

Wings over Alaska

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BIRDING NEWSLETTER

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471 Alaska Birds

On February 9, 2004, the University of Alaska Museum released a revised checklist of Alaska birds. The scissor-tailed flycatcher, shy albatross and brown pelican were added in 2003, bringing the total number of known naturally occurring bird species in Alaska to 471. The list keeps growing. In 1959, Gabrielson and Lincoln reported 311 accepted species.

Download the list at

<http://www.uaf.edu/museum/bird/>

On the Wings of Spring



By Elizabeth Manning
Anchorage Daily News
(Reprinted with Permission)

Kelley Weaverling, the owner of Orca Book and Sound Co. in Cordova, has a favorite spring ritual: He takes a stool and thermos onto the mud flats of the Copper River Delta, then sits down to wait.

Inevitably, huge flocks of shorebirds — sometimes 10,000 or more — swirl above him. Surrounded by the sound of thousands of wings beating, Weaverling watches as birds dart about in dense clouds, undisturbed by his presence. Their tiny bodies flash white, then dark as they spin in unison in between feeding on invertebrates and fly larvae in the mud.

"It's just too cool," he said. "It's kind of like watching an avian aurora."

Every spring, 3 to 5 million shorebirds pass through the Copper River Delta near Cordova over a six-week period as they migrate back to Alaska from wintering grounds as far away as South America and the South Pacific. Biologists call it the largest shorebird migration in North America.

Western sandpiper and dunlin flocks are the biggest. But all told, more than 30 species migrate through the Copper River Delta. They stay for hours or days, depending on the species and the weather. If the weather is bad or winds unfavorable, flocks hunker down longer.

Large gatherings of birds, though not as many as in Cordova, also stop to rest along their migration at Kachemak

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A note from the editor

Pulling this newsletter together has posed a greater challenge than I expected. Who are Alaska birders? What do they want to know? What is available from other sources?

Originally, I proposed to highlight one destination and one bird species in each newsletter. Each time I would get close to finished, something new or "more interesting" would surface. Ultimately, we've ended up with a collection of news, events, and a birder profile.

Now, I need to hear from you. What do you want to know about birds and birding in Alaska? Send your thoughts to me at wingsoveralaska@fishgame.state.ak.us or call 907-465-5157.

Happy birding!

Karla Hart

Wings Over Alaska

Program Coordinator



Wings Over Alaska is a Watchable Wildlife program of the Division of Wildlife Conservation, Alaska Department of Fish and Game.



Alaska Airlines is a sponsor of *Wings Over Alaska*.

Letters to Wings Over Alaska

Report Your News

I subscribe to a couple of different birding magazines. However, I am disappointed because there is very little about birding in Alaska. Once you mentioned a newsletter.

I would be very interested in that. Couldn't birders from different areas contribute short articles on their area. That is what I am really interested in - what is happening in the bird world of Seward, Barrow, Dillingham? I would guess that you have some connection with people all over the state. Why not request a short article and then either E-mail or print it and we can follow what is happening in our own state.

Regards, Alice Sullivan, Nome

Editor's note - News about birds and birding from around the state are encouraged. Send them to wingsoveralaska@fishgame.state.ak.us

Great Backyard Bird Count

Small town birders were busy the weekend of February 13-16. Kodiak topped the list of species with 63, from 28 Great Backyard Bird Count reports. Gustavus had 52 species in 19 reports. Across Alaska 225 reports were filed from 32 communities. Results from 1998-2004 are posted at <http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc/>.

More Birdwatchers

The concept of encouraging bird watching in your great state is wonderful. The more birdwatchers there are, the more reports there will be on birds to go look for!

Some highlights of Alaska have been seeing a Siberian Stonechat on Gambell for my 700 American Birding Association life bird and my discovery of the first and only North American Yellow-throated Bunting, which was on Attu.

Thanks, Bud Johnson, Arizona

Alaska Rare Birds List

Ed Clark and Luke DeCicco of Fairbanks moderate the Alaska Rare Birds e-mail list. Recent postings are:

December 9 - Swamp Sparrows in Ketchikan

December 11 - Mountain Bluebird near Anchorage

December 23 - American Coot in Sitka

December 31 - Great Egret in Juneau

February 7 - Barred Owl in Juneau

March 11 - Western Gull in Gustavus

April 11 - Mountain Bluebirds in Juneau

You can subscribe and view archives from <https://www.uaf.edu:8025/mailman/listinfo/alaskabirds-l>. These rare bird postings are enriched by the moderators with historical information on previous sightings in Alaska.

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Bay. Smaller groups of the same shorebirds can also be seen near Anchorage, feeding on the upper Cook Inlet mud flats. Most of the birds are headed north and west to their breeding grounds, primarily on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta.

To celebrate the shorebirds' arrival, Homer and Cordova host festivals. The two Southcentral communities offer prime birding this time of year, usually from late April through May.

This year, both festivals are the same weekend — May 6-9 in Homer and May 7-9 in Cordova. Organizers expect the dates to coincide with the peak of the migration.

George Matz, field trip chairman for the Anchorage Audubon Society, said each festival offers a different experience.

The Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival in Homer draws a couple thousand birders, although fewer shorebirds flock there. Matz said the town buzzes with activity, and people can see more species around Homer because of the varied habitats and the crowds looking.

"If there's a weird bird out there, chances are we'll see it," said Carmen Field, an education specialist and naturalist with the Kachemak Bay Research Reserve.

During past festivals, Field said, birders have spotted a Ross' goose, an Arctic nesting species that seldom passes through Homer, and a ruff, another rare species.

In addition to the focus on shorebirds, many people scan the shoreline or take boat tours during the weekend, looking for seabirds or other water birds. Or they can also go inland or

along the shore to see land birds, ranging from pheasants and spruce grouse to woodpeckers and chickadees.

All told, people have a chance to see more than 100 bird species, including Arctic terns that migrate from Antarctica to Alaska each spring.

Commonly seen shorebirds during the Kachemak Bay festival include western sandpipers, dunlins and short-



Bar-tailed Godwit, Tim Bowman/USFWS

billed dowitchers. Less common are least sandpipers; greater and lesser yellowlegs; Wilson's snipe; black-bellied, golden- and semipalmated plovers; Hudsonian, marbled and bar-tailed godwits and surf birds.

The Copper River Delta Shorebird Festival, by comparison, usually draws just a few hundred people. But on the tidal flats of Hartney Bay, just outside of Cordova, birders have the opportunity to be surrounded by thousands of shorebirds, mostly western sandpipers and dunlins. Birders there also have the chance to see more than 30 species of shorebirds.

Another popular birding hot spot at that festival, mainly for waterfowl, is Alaganik Slough outside of Cordova on the delta.

Mary Anne Bishop, research ecologist at the Prince William Sound Science Center, said 80 to 90 percent of all the western sandpipers that come to Alaska stop to rest and feed along the Copper River Delta. Most of those birds winter around San Francisco Bay, Baja

Alaska is Above Average in Birdwatchers

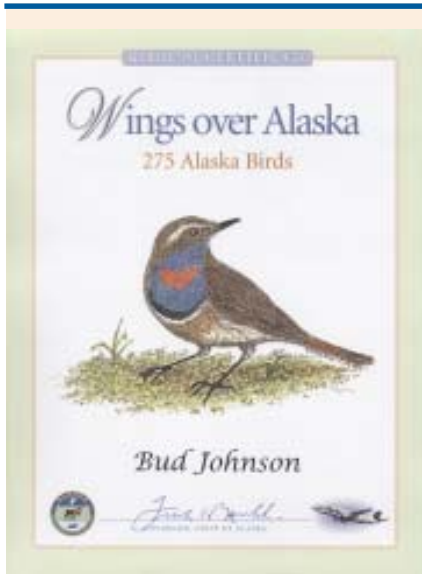
Every five years the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conducts a national survey of fishing, hunting, and wildlife-associated recreation. In the 2001 survey, they asked birding questions.

With 36% participation in birdwatching by residents, Alaska ties with Washington, Minnesota, and Maine. Only Montana, Vermont, and Wisconsin have higher levels of participation. The national average is 22%.

Of an estimated 321,000 birders in Alaska (about half residents and half visitors), 14% keep birding life lists, 22% can identify 41 or more species by sight or sound, and 62% said they could identify just 1-20 species.

Is your money going to the birds? In 2001, an estimated \$3.6 million was spent in Alaska on bird food. The average birder spent \$37.

Learn more at <http://federalaid.fws.gov/surveys/surveys.html>.



Wings Over Alaska Certificates

The Wings over Alaska program acknowledges birding experience at four levels:

- A Ptarmigan certificate for observers who have identified at least 50 and up to 124 species of birds within Alaska;
- A Gyrfalcon certificate for 125 to 199 birds;
- An Eider certificate for 200 to 274 birds; and
- A Bluethroat certificate for 275-plus birds is signed by the Governor.

Certificates are free.

The application is online at <http://www.birding.alaska.gov> or request one from Alaska Department of Fish and Game at 907-465-4190. We're compiling the survey information on the applications and will report the results in an upcoming newsletter.

California and mainland Mexico, and Panama — even as far south as Peru, she said.

The sheer volume of birds is staggering, according to Matz. As many as 75,000 birds can be seen at one time around Hartney Bay, Bishop said.

Shorebirds tend to gather on the Copper River Delta because of the area's food resources and because the birds get funneled into a small band by steep coastal mountains south of Cordova.

Weaverling likens the flyway to a turnpike with limited rest stops. The Copper River Delta is like the biggest, most popular HoJo's restaurant along the way, he said.

Matz enjoys going to the shorebird festivals for the social activities and the birding, but also out of awe for shorebirds that undertake some of the longest migrations of any creature.

"It's amazing how they fly so far on a gram of fuel," he said. "The story behind migration is one of the greatest stories of nature."

One distance champ is the Pacific golden-plover. The ones that spend the summer in Alaska typically winter in Hawaii, but some may come from as far away as New Zealand.

Based on radio transmitter data, Bishop said, scientists once recorded a

Pacific golden-plover that made the trip from Oahu, in the Hawaiian islands to the Copper River Delta in 90 hours — a minimum flight speed of about 31 miles per hour.

Other transmitter data shows that a western sandpiper once flew 1,900 miles from San Francisco to the delta in less than 42 hours, averaging more than 40 miles per hour.

Some migrating birds have adapted in fascinating ways, said Andrea Swingley, education coordinator at the Alaska Bird Observatory in Fairbanks. She is giving a talk during the Homer conference about some of those adaptations. The bar-tailed godwit, for instance, shrinks its liver and intestines to make room for fat that fuels its long journey.

Bishop said not to worry if it appears to be a late spring this year. The birds follow their own internal clock, she said, and always pass through the region from late April through May.

But some years the flocks are larger than in other years.

"There are always some birds," Matz said. "It's just a matter of how many."



Learn more about migration of birds at <http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/othrdata/migratio/migratio.htm>



Yellowlegs, © ADF&G

Young Birder Recognized for Dedication and Talent



Courtesy Patty Brown.
Chris "Bird" Allen on a school field trip along the Chilkat River, studying plant communities, with Deb Kemp, a chaperone, and parent of a classmate.

By Riley Woodford

In Haines, Alaska, a town of 2,800 where bald eagles can literally outnumber people, a young birder has distinguished himself with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

Chris "Bird" Allen, 14, was awarded a Gyrfalcon Certificate this week by Fish and Game. Allen is the youngest wildlife watcher to qualify for the certificate, part of the state's Wing's Over Alaska birding program. The Gyrfalcon certificate acknowledges that Allen has identified more than 125 birds in Alaska.

"I have a birding journal I keep of the birds I've seen," Allen said. "I've seen about 132 birds now."

Allen said he goes birding with a family friend or a teacher at times, but he does most of his birding alone.

"I get on my bike and go birding by myself, I just ride around," he said. "I see common birds like eagles all the

time - the winter is completely different than summer for birds. I've seen some really cool birds. My favorite birds are the chickadees, they're really active, and you can see them in the winter - not so much the black-capped, mostly the Chestnut backed."

Allen is an eighth-grader at Haines Middle School. His science teacher, Patty Brown, is also an active birder. When she met Allen two years ago, as a sixth-grader, he was already an accomplished wildlife observer.

"He came to me already a birder," Brown said. "I've spent a lot of my adult life birding, and I recognized this was not an ordinary kid when it comes to nature watching."

Brown said she and Allen talk about birding, and they did the Christmas bird count together two years ago. On field trips with other students, she said Allen is a valuable asset and a good teacher.

"I grew up birding, but I didn't start out with his precision and dedication," she said.

Allen's skills have given him a reputation - and a nickname - among his peers.

"In sixth grade, there are not too many kids that bird (watch)," Brown said. "Once it leaked out, kids starting calling him 'Bird.' He wasn't sure at first if it was a put down, he wasn't sure if that was the identity and nickname he wanted to have, but he decided it was okay, and now he's called Bird. So a new kid in school wouldn't know he had another name."

Allen said that Al DeMartini, a family friend and seasonal worker with Fish and Game, introduced him to bird

watching about five years ago.

"I started in fourth grade," Allen said. "Al stopped over to see my dad and he brought me a National Geographic Field Guide to Birds. My dad gave me a pair of binoculars, and I started seeing what birds I could see out of the book. It was really hard at first - birds confused me at first. It gets easier to identify species once you start learning how."

"Some are still really tricky - like gulls, they interbreed and stuff," Allen added. "Sandpipers can be really difficult, they get mud on them, and the peepers, the little species of sandpipers - they can be tricky."

Allen has also been learning to identify birds by calls and songs, and said he hopes to go to college and study ornithology. He'd also like to visit Australia and see birds of paradise, emus and platypus. He plans to continue with the Wings Over Alaska program and earn his Bluethroat Certificate in coming years.

"It's a good program, you can collect data about what birds are around Alaska, and it gets people involved in birding," he said. "Birding is way safer than watching bears or moose. I've always liked all kinds of animals, it just seems that birds are special."



**Send your young birder to
Alaska Bird Camp 2004 in
Fairbanks in June. Details at
<http://alaskabird.org>**



Birding, wildlife and nature festivals bring communities together to celebrate wildlife with unique combinations of science, education, field trips, music, arts, and festivities. They can also create an economic boost by drawing visitors. *How to Organize a Birding or Wildlife Festival* by Nancy Millar is a proven step-by-step manual for festival organizers. Available online from the American Birding Association at <http://www.americanbirding.org/programs/consfestmanual.htm>.

The Wings Over Alaska Birding Newsletter is available online at <http://www.birding.alaska.gov>.

To receive an e-mail when we post new issues, send your e-mail with **SUBSCRIBE** in the subject line to wingsoveralaska@fishgame.state.ak.us

All photos ©ADF&G.

Celebrate spring with birding and wildlife festivals.

Days are lengthening and spring is here. Around the state festival organizers have prepared fun and educational programs to celebrate. You will find more events and links to most of these on the Wildlife Calendar at <http://www.wildlife.alaska.gov/>.

Homer's Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival

May 6 – 9 Alaska's biggest birding festival with over 50 events and keynote speaker Pete Dunne.

Cordova's Copper River Delta Shorebird Festival

May 7 – 9 Over 5 million shorebirds rest and feed on the Copper River Delta during spring migration.

Tok's Upper Tanana Migratory Bird Festival

May 14 – 15 Migrants, including ducks, geese, swans, cranes, raptors, and songbirds, begin arriving in the Tanana Valley in April and continue into early June.

Anchorage's International Migratory Bird Day

May 15 Learn about birds, birding, and bird conservation at the Alaska Zoo.

Chat About Birding

Over 100 birders in Juneau and neighboring communities (plus a few who just wish they were here) keep up on the latest bird sightings and events through Eagle Chat, an unmoderated list serve that allows any member to post messages. Membership is free and open to all. In the spring the list comes to life with reports of season "firsts" and unusual sightings.

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Eaglechat/>

Drawing on the Eagle Chat model, Alice Sullivan, an avid birder in Nome, has established Beringia Birders to share birding news in Western and Northern Alaska. Here is your chance to be a pioneer and help to develop Alaska's virtual Beringia birding community. Join up, introduce yourself, and share your birding stories, from Adak to Barrow and all points between.

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/beringia_birders/